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# Urban Performativity

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An approach to Urban Spaces through Performative events

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## Synopsis

This paper will explore the relationships between the genesis of the cities and the con-temporary events – political, social and cultural- that take place in them from a per-formative point of view. There is a link between the everyday life of our cities and the different layers of history encompassed on them, they form a palimpsest. But there is not just a physical reality, the spatial configurations of our cities are linked to actions and rituals, and these can be read and understood approaching urban complexity from the point of view of performance studies.

In this paper, we will answer the questions: how is the urban identity shaped through performative events both as everyday activities and festivals? In which way the physical environment shapes the human interactions that take place on it? And also, how human interactions interfere with the physical space and its meaning?

**Key words:** Performativity, events, urban space, everyday life.

## 1. The performative origins of the city

This paper will explore the relationships between the genesis of the cities and the con-temporary events – political, social and cultural- that take place in them from a per-formative point of view. There is a link between the everyday life of our cities and the different layers of history encompassed on them, they form a palimpsest. But there is not just a physical reality, the spatial configurations of our cities are linked to actions and rituals, and these can be read and understood approaching urban complexity from the point of view of performance studies.

It is not a secret that the origin of the cities is in the human body. Cities emerged as a relational space based on how bodies interact with others in their everyday life. One of the clearest contemporary example of this are slums; parts of the city that just respond to the utilitarian use of space by their inhabitants. In the case of the favelas in Brazil, as Berenstein observes in *The aesthetics of the favela*, they are not designed to be seen, they are just responding to the fluxes based on their inhabitants' everyday lives (Berenstein, 2003).

They have not a monumental function, they are not purely aesthetic – although they have some inherent beauty – they articulate the use with the local constructive systems and the spatial and geographical constraints of the area. There is no architect or de-signer in the building process of the favela, just a community that creates an environ-ment with the minimal –and many times not enough – elements to develop their every-day lives. Its clearest feature is that they have been created having the human body as spatial scale in the configuration of these urban areas.

The programme of these housing developments is based on actions, or, as Mumford defines: “the urban drama”. Public spaces are adapted to the uses that communities need to develop on them, and their character can change several times in the day de-pending on how they are being used. They are meeting spaces, playgrounds or just areas to socialize. Mumford approaches the city as a theatre, as he states: “it is in the city, the city as a theatre where man’s mere purposive activities are focused and work out, through conflicting and cooperating personalities, events, groups, into more signifi-cant culminations” (Mumford,1937). The city has its inherent narrative, and it is experi-enced through time, as it is what makes the body able to engage with space.

## 2. Performance and events in public spheres

One of the premises of this research to approach the city from a performative event, in order to get to a better understanding of its inherent laws of movement and tensions, where performativity is introduced as a new spatial and ludic dimension. This attempt of approaching the city through performance studies has already been pro-posed, Paul Makeham points out that “performance studies, provide an interpretive frame for analysing the urban drama, encompassing not only formally designated art-works but an almost infinitive range of other phenomena as well” (Makeham, 2005).

Although, what as researchers, we may ask is: what can performance studies offer in terms of research in the context of architecture and urban-ism? In Thirdspace, Soja explains how the interpretation of space is usually reduced



to two ways of understanding it: the first one is the physical and geographical space, and the second one, which is more subjective - is focused on how we think of space; its mental or ideal representations. Soja proposes the *Thirdspace*, which is de-scribed by superposition, where “everything comes together... subjectivity and objectiv-ity, the abstract and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending story” (Soja, 1996:57).



Figure 1. *The Trial of Harold Pinter*. Aleksandar Dundjerovic (NATO bombed factory in Kragujevac 2008).

Looking at contemporary performance practices, Lehmann defends the idea that it is possible to approach the creative process from a different point of view, not just from the text (Lehmann, 2006). The dramatic text looses its supremacy giving space, bodies or light a more important role within the creative process. In practical terms, this means that a theatrical piece can start with a movement score that would trigger the rest of the elements. If we think of space design, at the moment, we have the architect or the ur-ban/ landscape designer, who develops a project. What is proposed, is to address urban design as a post-dramatic process, not just from the desk of the designer, but from the analysis of space with different interdisciplinary tools. In other words; to let the “dramaturgy of space” emerge.

### 3. Site specific performance as a methodology of space analysis

Looking at a specific environment from performativity underlines the characteristics of space, for example street performers in Rome are part of the city's contemporary land-scape, and in their interaction with the monuments, give a different meaning to some areas of the city. Pearson explains that: "Performance might then be in conflict with or indifferent to site as well as reciprocal – and vice versa –only through studied indifference would demonstrate its specificity" (Pearson, M., 2010:40). This means that depending on how the performative layer interacts with pre-existent space, looking for the conflict and reciprocity, and contrasting both fiction and reality it is possible to find out unexpected data.

At the end of Pearson's lecture at the Quadrennial of Scenography in Prague in 2015, he pointed out: "put twenty dancers in a corridor and you'll figure out the characteristics of the corridor". All the processes we propose to increase our knowledge of the space are based on the physical experience so, as those dancers with their moving *sensitive* bodies, setting up interdisciplinary projects with teams formed by architects, dancers and performers in collaboration with citizens or specific communities, we can be able to unveil some of the characteristics of urban space.



Figure 2. Exploration of the architectural space applying Anne Bogart's Viewpoints. Dynamic Cartography, MJ. Martinez (2014).

The city and its performativity encompass more complexity that we are aware of, and traditional or more normalized methodologies are not offering us the information we need. Pearson's answer to this problematic may rely on an interdisciplinary approach to architectural and urban space from the sensitiveness of the arts. In this paper we will answer the questions: how is the urban identity shaped through performative events both as everyday activities and festivals? In

which way the physical environment shapes the human interactions that take place on it? And also, how human interactions interfere with the physical space and its meaning?

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